A Pioneering German Feminist Looks Back in Anguish; The Saturday Profile

The New York Times

March 8, 2018 14:29 EST

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Section: WORLD; europe

Length: 1295 words

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Highlight: Alice Schwarzer, who has battled for women's rights for years, is stunned that "an old-school sexist" like Donald J. Trump could win the presidency.

Body

COLOGNE, Germany — When Alice Schwarzer was starting out as a women's activist, she was at the side of people like Simone de Beauvoir, the French writer and feminist. The heady days of political struggle begun in 1968 led both women, and many contemporaries, to believe their many battles could be swiftly won.

Almost 50 years later, Ms. Schwarzer, Germany's best-known feminist, is still fighting, but time has not much changed the targets: white men, autocrats and anyone else who wants to decide for a woman what she does with her body, from abortion to shrouding herself in a burqa.

"The easy times of postfeminism are over," Ms. Schwarzer, 74, now proclaims. "At the latest since Trump's election, it is feminism pure which is needed."

That battle cry sounded from the pages of EMMA, the feminist magazine that Ms. Schwarzer started in 1977 on the proceeds of the most successful of her 25 books, "The Little Difference and Its Huge Consequences," first published in 1975 and now translated into 12 languages.

EMMA celebrated its 40th birthday in January, with Ms. Schwarzer proudly noting that it is solvent and independent, financed by subscriptions and newsstand sales, with a bimonthly circulation of 50,000.

"Had someone told me 40 years ago that I would still be doing EMMA in the year 2017, I would probably have just shaken my head in disbelief," she wrote in the birthday editorial.

She is by no means meekly shaking that head, still banging loudly on any table within banging distance, giving speeches nationwide and enlivening television debates.

"There is scarcely a person in our country who experiences such a high degree of admiration but also rejection as her," said Markus Lanz, a talk-show host, when introducing Ms. Schwarzer two weeks ago.

The current particular targets of Ms. Schwarzer's ire are President Trump and Turkey's increasingly authoritarian leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"What is so shocking for all of us," Ms. Schwarzer said of Mr. Trump's election, "is that such an old-school sexist makes it to the top, and that so many women voted for him. That is backlash, that is reactionary."

In her vehement view, both he and Mr. Erdogan — "a lifelong proponent of God's state" — can be compared to the Nazis. And she is adamant that it is "so fatal that in our democracies we have failed to recognize Islamism as the fascism of the 21st century."

Ms. Schwarzer first experienced what she sees as Islamic extremism in 1979, when she reported on the Iranian revolution. More recently, she and her small staff have chronicled the fateful New Year's Eve in Cologne in 2015, when hundreds of women reported being assaulted or robbed by crowds of men, many of them apparently from North Africa.

The episode called into question the wisdom of Chancellor Angela Merkel in allowing hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants, many of them Muslim, into Germany in the months before. Investigations have highlighted police incompetence as one cause of the chaos. Almost no one has been convicted in the assaults or the disorder, much to Ms. Schwarzer's chagrin.

Passion and the feminist cause seem to have come naturally to Ms. Schwarzer, who was born in December 1942 in the Ruhr industrial town of Wuppertal. She was raised by youthful maternal grandparents after her mother gave birth at age 22 and then largely vanished from her life.

Most unusually for those times, Ms. Schwarzer's grandmother, Margarete Schwarzer, known as Grete, who was 46 when Alice was born, "had a point of view" and was unafraid to say so.

"She was very anti-Nazi," Ms. Schwarzer said. "Which isolated anyone in the Nazi time. And not just then. You must know that also after 1945 it was not fashionable to be anti-Nazi and that — as my grandmother could attest — the Nazis all still sat at their posts, in City Hall, everywhere."

Her grandmother was also "a visionary," Ms. Schwarzer said. "She was an eco-activist already in the 1950s and campaigned for animal rights. I don't know where she got it from, but she was proved right. She was a very sharp political thinker."

By contrast, Ms. Schwarzer said, "my grandfather changed diapers" and "was a very sensitive, fun, dear person."

Growing up as one of a trio with equal rights, "I thought women may think and men also have something maternal," she said. "Then I went out into the world, and it was different. Perhaps that's also what enrages me."

Evacuated to Bavaria during World War II, Ms. Schwarzer returned to Wuppertal in 1950, finished school at 16 and became an office worker. Soon, she went to neighboring France, learning French and doing odd jobs until getting a journalist traineeship in 1966 in Düsseldorf.

After a stint at a German satirical magazine, she returned to Paris and joined the Movement for the Liberation of Women in 1970.

That was where she met de Beauvoir, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and other luminaries of France's then-vibrant left-wing political scene. In April 1971, Ms. Schwarzer joined de Beauvoir, the actress Catherine Deneuve and 340 other women in admitting publicly that they had had what were then illegal abortions.

By June of that year, Ms. Schwarzer had exported the idea to Germany, where 374 women, including herself and popular actresses like Romy Schneider, published similar admissions in their ultimately successful campaign to legalize abortion.

Ms. Schwarzer, a confirmed Francophile, still splits time between Cologne, a city very much of Germany's west, and a pied-à-terre in Paris. France "is really a way of living that I otherwise miss," she said.

It also perhaps feeds a lifelong sense of being an outsider. Ms. Schwarzer never married, has written about one long-ago 10-year relationship with a Frenchman and has been variously associated with male and female partners.

One joy of recent years, she said, has been befriending Ms. Merkel.

Their acquaintance began in 1991 when Ms. Merkel, then a slightly awkward former scientist from the Communist East, became minister for women and youth. As she rose in the next decade, she was constantly underestimated by male counterparts, but not by Ms. Schwarzer, who called her to set up a lunch in Cologne.

“I was impressed by her intelligence, her openness and her palpable integrity,” Ms. Schwarzer said. They fell into a pattern of meeting once or twice a year, she said.

When Ms. Merkel was sworn in as Germany’s first female chancellor in November 2005, Ms. Schwarzer said, “I almost wept.” She recalled saying that day: “Yes, now little girls in Germany know they can become a hairdresser, or chancellor. Let’s see.”

Ms. Merkel has played down her role as a pioneering woman, but she made a point of congratulating EMMA on its 40th birthday, wishing that it “may continue to fight stubbornly on women’s issues and not get blown off course.”

That is unlikely to happen to Ms. Schwarzer. As she recalled how the abortion rights stance helped start the women’s movement in France and Germany, anger overcame her once more.

“I have been speaking out now for almost 50 years, and it just can’t be,” she shouted, banging the table twice for emphasis, “that we have to defend it again in Germany and Poland,” where there are mounting anti-abortion campaigns.

“It is just unbelievable that we are simply treading water,” she said. “We came forward so at least in the Western world we could walk with our heads held high.”

Follow Alison Smale on Twitter @asmalenyt.

PHOTO: Alice Schwarzer, center, founder of the feminist magazine EMMA, with some of its employees. The magazine celebrated its 40th birthday in January. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Henning Kaiser/Picture-Alliance, via Associated Press FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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Publication-Type: Web Blog

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Load-Date: March 8, 2018

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